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“From schoolboy to counsellor: An autoethnography of deconstructions and reconstructions of the self as a learner”

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Accessible summary

What is known on the subject:

- Autoethnographic methods can explore key learning experiences and significant occurrences over a particular lifespan.
- In this paper, the author has explored and employed these methods to examine the constructs of the self and how such learning may enrich the lifespan of a trainee counsellor.

What the paper adds to existing knowledge:

- These findings will add to the research literature in the field that is limited in relation to identity formation, impact of education on learners and men becoming therapists.
- Key themes emerged, “He’s a sensitive boy”—learning to hide, help through others—I can learn and re-construction—restoration and healing.

What are the implications for practice:

- Despite the introspective nature of autoethnography, findings from this narrative have a bearing on the importance of inter-dependant relationships and support and how they can impact on learning and how people are viewed and labelled by communities and societies.
- These findings also illuminate the understanding of the construction and reconstruction of the self and inform how a person, in therapy, can rebuild their lives by considering more than the negative narratives about themselves?

1 | BACKGROUND TO THIS PAPER

This paper is written in the first person to illuminate the voice of the author.

In this paper, I wanted to explore my experiences as a learner and how they have influenced my constructions of self and how I can use these experiences to help construct a new identity? I selected an autoethnographic approach as the methodology for this study. I wanted to use a framework that would give value and meaning to my desire to make sense of my own experience. As a

researcher, I was not trying to become an insider in the research setting, I was in fact already as a teacher, nurse and trainee therapist. Autoethnography can be a deterrent to objective perception and analysis (Aguilar, 1981). I needed a framework that would help me make sense of my own experience and give value to how these experiences have contributed to the construction of myself and how these constructions of influence my learning and recent trajectory into counselling therapies. Cheater (1987) describes autoethnographical research as being akin to being in your own lounge. I wanted to challenge myself and to be able to look at myself “from above” so to speak, to seek and to develop my own understanding

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of how my learning experiences have shaped the many constructions of myself (Cheater, 1987). Autoethnography gave me a chance to tell my own story and externalize my narrative to help me make sense of my unique world experience. Autoethnography allowed me to use a systematic reflective and reflexive approach to make sense and discover new understandings about myself. This form of methodology involves self-observation and reflexive investigation in the context of ethnographic fieldwork in writing (Marechal, 2010). Ellis and Bochner (2006) suggest that personal stories are a gift of living testimony and automethods provide a framework to analyse and make sense of these narratives.

2 | INTRODUCTION

Junior School 1969—Headmistress talking to me in her office with my parents after I was caught with a group of boys pushing another boy into a girl's toilet.

“...we are moving Neil into the class 1 (3 years below my current class) as a punishment for behaving this way, we hope this will teach him to behave and act his age!”

I spent 6 months in class with children who were 3 years young than me, sat at a desk at the back of the class, I was lonely and afraid. This shameful and humiliating experience was part of the negative constructions of myself as learner that haunt me to this day.

My sense of myself started at home with my family. I recall that I was rarely comfortable with relationships as a child; my memories as a child were punctuated by not feeling a part of, or understanding the world I was living in. Not feeling wanted, understood or heard can be a lonely and confusing world to live in. Especially as an infant, child and adolescent, when children are thought to developing secure attachments and sense of self (Winnicott, 1988). What feels fundamental about these relationships is what I learnt about myself and others via the relationships I was part of and observed. I was told by my parents and teachers that I was a “sensitive child” and that my behaviours were sometimes difficult to control; that I found it hard to grasp some of the essential knowledge and skills needed to be “doing what the other kids do,” reading, writing, talking, playing, having fun. My sense of myself and the way I have lived and learned have been fundamentally influenced by these early constructions about myself as a boy and man (Stahl & Dale, 2013). How these truths were constructed interested me as learner and trainee counsellor; the ways in which society controls and chooses what it prefers and tolerates as “human,” (Bauman, 2005). I wanted to explore and understand questions about the constructs of self and how my learning has been influenced by what some refer to as “othering,” (Meekums, 2008). For example, the distinctions between people who are seen and perceive themselves to be different, as opposed to those who are perceived as safe and familiar. I chose to focus

on the key elements of my learning journey to explore how people can be constructed, e.g. via language, personal narratives and ideologies.

I selected an autoethnographic approach as the methodology for this paper. I needed a framework that would help me make sense of my own experiences as a learner and to give value to how these experiences have contributed to the construction of myself. I wanted to challenge myself personally while exploring myself impartially. Hence, autoethnography allowed me to broaden my perspective of who I am and unfold a story to help me make sense of my unique world experiences. Cheater (1987) describes autoethnographic research, “As being in your own front room,” in that the researcher becomes aware of the self and is analysing and observing themselves rather than others as traditional ethnography research might propose. This form of methodology involves self-observation and reflexive investigation in the context of ethnographic fieldwork in writing.

3 | THE SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED SELF

Before discussing the social construction of the self (or myself), it is important to briefly characterize social construction, Dudley-Marling (2004). Social constructionism understands people and objects as constructs of language and human relationships, in which our assumptions about the world are developed. Moreover, constructionism can be contingent on the dynamics of society, and as such, knowledge about the world involves fluidity and interpretation rather than empirical absolutes (Bryman, 2008). These constructions of self are shaped by what Gergen (2011) refers to as deeply held western beliefs and that we hold “mental concepts” of ourselves. Societies speak and refer to these concepts of self as potentially being faulty or dysfunctional with the individual self, simply being the processes related to conscious choice. The self is represented commonly as... “individual knower, the rational, self-directing, morally centred and knowledgeable agent of action.” (Gergen, 2011, pg. 2). The constructionist view challenges these beliefs by attempting to develop an idea that discounts the notion of a bounded self as a singular identity in a social world with relational process (Gergen, 2011). This construct suggests that it is not the self that individuals bring to form relationships, it is that the psychological self emerges as result of the relational process.

The constructionist view challenges these beliefs by attempting to develop an unfixed reality, that discounts the notion of a bounded self as a singular identity in a social world with relational process. This construct suggests that it is not the self that individuals bring to form relationships, but furthermore, the psychological self emerges as result of these relational process.

4 | THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

My development continued at school where my aspirations and needs were neglected in what felt like an emerging construction

by others of “me” having issues with learning. This is part of the technical gaze that has permeated the apparatus or systems of education of education that assumes that learning disabilities can be explained pathologically and exists in individual students. This left me uninspired and lacking in confidence and believing that the issues I faced with learning was some sort of dysfunction on my part, “I was the problem.” These experiences continue to shape my early constructions of self and stayed with me until I began to build secure and meaningful relationships with mentors in and out of education where I was given the opportunity to develop a sense of myself as a skilful insightful person that had the ability to learn. These mentors gave me confidence and nurtured my abilities and gave me a secure unconditional basis to explore and learn. It is interesting to note that it was the relational aspects of learning I needed and when these secure relationships were not available to me, my confidence waned and the earlier construction of myself as a dysfunctional learner prevailed. These varying constructions and deconstructions of self continued throughout my adult life and culminated in identifying some very specific learning needs that opened new opportunities and experiences. I was again able to form strong relationships with people around me and could use technology to enhance and support my learning. I have had to continually fight against the response to my learning needs from others and from my internal critic that asks, “What’s wrong with you? Why can’t you do this?” and the search for a cure or a fix to these issues.

This search led to my decision to train as a therapist and to a fundamental change in my personal and professional view of myself. I found a new professional and academic home that has enabled me to re-frame my uniqueness and to start to explore what my relationship is with this perceived “problem” related to my learning. These life events have led me to explore how the social constructions of masculinity, nursing, therapy training and dyslexia have impacted on my identity throughout my learning journey. While this exploration has not answered these questions, it has provided me with the time and space to explore these existential questions. This exploration felt important as it allowed me to explore my journey as a learner and how different constructions of myself have influenced what I have done so far and who I have become. This study also adds to the research literature in the field that is limited in relation to identity formation, impact of education on learners and men becoming therapists.

5 | METHODOLOGY

It has been suggested that autoethnography can be a deterrent to objective perception and analysis. I was aware that my insider status as a teacher, nurse and trainee therapist could mean that I lacked objectivity, whereas an outsider allows you to read what is going on with more objectivity, owing to distance and detachment. Moreover, as an insider I was familiar with the context of my life and my experiences of learning and surrounding the area being explored, I had

more social capital (Bourdieu, 1983). I wanted to immerse myself into a subjective reality of my experiences to create a narrative that externalized my inner thoughts, feelings and experiences to try and make sense of my learning. This approach allowed me to be aware of subjectivity and explore the relational aspects of my learning to discover new knowledge.

I wanted to challenge myself and to be able to look at myself “from above” and this methodology gave me a chance to tell my own story and to help me make sense of my unique world experience (Russell, 1999). Cheater (1987) describes autoethnographic research, “As being in your own front room.” This form of methodology involves self-observation and reflexive investigation in the context of ethnographic fieldwork in writing (Marechal, 2010). Ellis and Bochner (2006) suggest that personal stories are a gift of living testimony and that autoethnographic methods provide a framework to analyse and make sense of these narratives.

However, it has been suggested that autoethnography can be a deterrent to objective perception and analysis (Aguilar, 1981). I was aware that my insider status as a teacher, nurse & trainee therapist could mean that I lacked objectivity, whereas an outsider allows you to read what is going on with more objectivity, as you are more detached and more distant. Moreover, as an insider I was familiar with the context of my life and my experiences of learning and surrounding the area being explored, I had more social capital (Bourdieu, 1983). I wanted to immerse myself into a subjective reality of my experiences to create a narrative that externalized my inner thoughts, feelings and experiences to try and make sense of my learning (Russell, 1999). This approach allowed me to be subjective and explore the relational aspects of my learning to discover new knowledge.

6 | ETHICS

I was aware at the outset that this research journey could cause me some emotional harm and that I could seek support from my personal counsellor and supervisor. I sought what is termed written “free consent.” Free consent can be challenged as it will be one and the same person asking and agreeing to participate in this study. The question of privacy was a theme of this entire process. The question of what is public and what is private was difficult to answer in relation to my own exploration. I recounted some experiences by citing others in my narrative. I did not use any names or place names to identify individuals in this study that may be used in the narratives. Social research can entail the possibility of destroying privacy and autonomy of the individual. I ensured that no individual could be identified in this study.

It is interesting to note that autoethnography is sometimes referred to as a permanent tattoo and I will ensure that I protect myself and others from future vulnerabilities in relation different types of media I will be exploring in this study, for example, photographs, music, artwork and my own personal narratives. We should assume that all people mentioned in this study may read this one day so it is

important for me to gain consent from any participants and if this is not possible maintain anonymity and confidentiality regarding this study to do no harm to others. I will have sought written consent from people that were feature in any of the data collected and analysed. I was in therapy on a weekly basis and met regularly with my supervisor and used this time to reflect on and think about how to stay safe whilst undertaking this research.

7 | PROCEDURE

I wanted to keep the methods for data collection and analysis open as I was unsure about what I would find when I explored, mapped, collected and reflected on the significant aspects of my learning experiences and how these experiences contributed to my many constructions of self (Meekums, 2008). My ambition was to free my mind and think about creative ways of collecting and reflecting on historical data that would allow me to shape and develop themes related to living and learning. I also kept a reflexive diary and recorded my feelings and ideas related to immersing myself in my life history. The analysis and reflections began as soon as started articulating my intentions to pursue this method at the end of the first year of the module in year one.

I initiated this process by plotting my life timeline detailing what I felt were useful aspects of my learning experiences. This detailed my age, where I was born, where I lived, whom I lived with, the institutions I studied at. A cacophony of feelings and memories have flooded in and out of my life and my reflexive diary captured my feelings and reflections. The development of the timeline was a creative, exhilarating and empowering experience as opposed to the writing. It is interesting to note that even before I started writing, I felt anxious as it appeared to be associated with the negative constructions of myself as a learner.

As this process unfolded, I shaped and added data to this timeline using some overall questions to help me identify key learning experiences:

- Where did my learning occur?
- What relationships influenced my learning?
- Where did my learning take place?
- What was I feeling at that time?
- What I perceived other people were feeling?
- My sense of self during this period?
- How was I seen by others?
- What was I reading, seeing, feeling and learning during periods of my life?

I continued to add data to the timeline and developed three distinctive phases of my learning experiences, in years, 0 to 16, 16–40 and 40 to 54. I focussed on these phases and continued to add different types of data to these timelines.

I recorded personal narratives related to these areas by using pictures, music, books and identifying key relationships in these phases of my life. I also wanted to do use some experiential work and recorded some videos of me taking the walk to school that I did as a six-year-old and other visits to homes where I lived and key

institutions where my learning experiences unfolded in areas where I spent time being human.

I immersed myself in the data, using all my senses to explore significant life events, relationships and contexts that linked to the many identifies I have occupied in my life. I wanted to focus on my subjective experience, with the focus on the where links should be made (Ellis & Bochner, 2006). It is suggested that the use of this storytelling unearths meaning without trying to define it.

I used my story to try to develop a better understanding of the world I experienced as a learner. Central to autoethnography is the need for the author to be highly visible and active in the text. My feelings and experiences were incorporated into my story; I have documented how I was affected by this process taking extracts from my reflexive diary. Most importantly, I didn't shy away from how I felt. The interpretation of the data involved moving back and forth between the self and others and around the personal and social realm, submerging and emerging from the data, I searched for emerging themes and related these to existing theories on the social construction of the self.

The following themes are a representation of this iterative process and are closely aligned to phases in my life. I have chosen to explore 3 aspects of my learning experience and how these have influenced by construction of myself.

8 | THEMES

8.1 | He's a Sensitive Boy—Learning to Hide!

My first real memory as a child was how exciting and fascinating the world was, with so much to learn, so much to see. I was born at home July 10th, 1963 and my mother father and older brother (by three years) lived in a council house in industrial working town in the West of England. My father was a plumber my mum was a housewife, with my dad working in a local car factory and in the evenings installing central heating to save for our first house. My early memories are punctuated by exploration, excitement and fear as I learned to walk and talk and develop relationships with my family. One of my earliest memories was when I was about four years old and was taken to playschool which was in a nearby church. I remember feeling very insecure about being away from my mother and not wanting to go to Playschool and feeling very uncomfortable with being there. I became tearful on arrival and just did not get the idea of why my mother was there and why she was leaving me. I can remember not wanting to play with other children and not finding the environment at all stimulating or comforting. I was so distressed by these events daily; I attempted to run home and would give any opportunity run away from the playgroup to my house that was only five minutes away. My recollections led me to believe that my mum was not too happy about me leaving playgroup and of course the staff were very concerned, and I can recall being told off for attempting to leave and staff trying to encourage me to take part in the activities in the group. My parents would

also encourage me to go to playschool, with my dad saying “you are being a silly boy you must go to playschool.”

This is one of the many encounters I experienced in my childhood, that I feel shaped my first construction of self, the construction of “sensitivity” a term that was frequently used by my mother and significant others. I can recall my mother telling me (repeatedly) that I was “too sensitive.” My mother constantly urged me to control what she called “my sensitivity” as she thought that this may result in me being hurt. I am now beginning to understand what she meant by sensitivity, this sensitivity was referring to my feelings and she and others were giving me strong messages to disable my feelings and not share these with others. The way I was taught and learnt to deal with feelings was to push them away and “shut them down” and this became part of my unconsciousness, forming into well-rehearsed scripts that I would follow. I believed that if I shared my feelings I would be shut down, I feared that people would treat me harshly owing to sharing my feelings, as the nursery did, and I would be made to go back to the nursery and told to stop being “silly.” These experiences affected my construction of self as a boy and permeated me as a man. What I believed to be “my sensitivity” ultimately led me to believe that I must not be “silly” or “sensitive” to be accepted as worthy of love or positive regard by my parents and significant others. I had learned as a child the things I needed to do to please my parents and I endeavoured to repress my “sensitivity” and “silliness” and to be a “good boy.”

8.2 | Help through others—I Can Learn!

Moving through early childhood into school up until the age of 18 my learning experiences did not improve. I have very many recollections of feeling bored, unconnected and somewhat perplexed by human emotions and learning experiences. I struggled to read and write; all my junior school reports used terminology like “Neil must try harder, Neil needs to concentrate, Neil appears to be too worried about what others think of him, he often daydreams and can be quite rude when he is asked to get on with his work.” I did not like going to school and even now thinking back of my school experiences, makes me feel anxious. I never felt part of anything, I joined the chess group, I was unable to hold my own and lost my confidence. I joined the football team, I was stuck in goal, I didn't enjoy that very much! The narrative was set by others; I was unable or unwilling to learn. My learning needs were being constructed by others in the space of 1960–80 school system, where significance was placed on academic ability, that was measured by rote learning teaching methods. Moreover, knowledge was tested via examinations like the 11 + that streamed children into ability groups and types of schools, for example, secondary modern and grammar schools. My position as a learner in school occupied the space that identified me as a passive, resistant learner (Jenkins, 2001). I was streamed into the bottom sets in all subjects and at one stage at junior school (because of incident where me

and some other boys pushed a boy into the girl's toilet against his will) I was put into a younger year group as punishment. This as young boy was a shaming experience and further compounded my negative sense of self, I wasn't even capable of learning with other children of the same age. I was constructed as a “deviant” learner and the difficulties I was facing did not reflect what I could achieve, they were a direct result of how I was being treated by teachers (Dudley-Marling, 2004).

It was not until I joined the sixth form that I was encouraged by teachers who believed that I had the ability to learn. The sixth form was liberating, no uniforms, access to a common room with a pool table and snack bar, a flexible timetable where you could come and go between lessons. It was at that time I was taught by an English teacher who encouraged me to read, encouraged me to write, spent an inordinate amount of time with me. It was this relationship that challenged my internal beliefs about myself as a learner and motivated me to pursue exciting ways to learn.

During this time, I was also growing into a man and noticed that people wanted to develop friendships with me, that others liked me and I began to like myself. This was a beautiful time in my life where I became a confident young man and indulged in the pleasures of life developing passions for music, alcohol, ideas and love. This lust for life and learning kick-started my passion for working with others and developing a real interest in social justice, humanitarian and environmental causes.

Much to the displeasure of my parents and extended family, I took a position as a student nurse and a local hospital for people with learning disabilities. I volunteered at this hospital as a sixth former and was struck by the institutional nature of people's lives, that up until this time, I was never aware of. It was here that I developed a lifelong relationship with my nurse tutor who to this day is my mentor and friend. Together with other students and committed staff we challenged, supported and developed ideas in relation to improving the lives of people with learning disabilities in the communities we lived in.

I worked at my studies because of the key difference between these experiences and those of when I was a child. The latter involving positive and nurturing relationships that had come to be around me, alongside the engaging nature of the theories and ideas that supported my transition in wanting to help support people. This was an empowering phase of my life, a phase reflected by the belief that people are able, if supported and nurtured to learn and thrive in our communities, not unlike my own experiences of learning (Stahl & Dale, 2013).

I was beginning to take personal control over aspects of my life. It took the form of an almost spiritual element, at the level of feeling and the level of being able to make a difference in the world around me (Rappaport, 1985). I was being supported and exposed to a wide range of experiences that maintained and built competencies. Being empowered relates to my sense of being in control and to be in control gave me choices and I could act on matters that affect mine if others life (Zimmerman & Warschausky, 1998).

8.3 | Re-construction—Restoration & Healing—Neil

The contribution of significant others in helping me to feel secure, loved and able to live and learn alongside my colleagues and friends became a stable aspect of my middle years, between the ages of 30 and 45. On reflection and looking back the many aspects of my experiences of learning during that time has become clear. What I thought I needed, in order to function, was praise and acknowledgement from others; this was the only way at that time I felt competent as a man, father, son, husband, friend and teacher. I moved from a job as a practitioner working with families with children with learning disabilities to a nurse teacher as I had a passion for working with others to share common goals around supporting peoples' ability to learn. It was at this time that my early child experiences of being too sensitive and not been able to learn once again come to the fore as it was suggested by others that you cannot be a teacher if you are unable to spell, write and deal with all forms of communication competently. As a child, I had learned many ways to hide what I thought to be my failings and weaknesses and again I had to retreat and think about very many ways I could stop others from judging my ability to teach. Technological support was not available for me at that time and it wasn't until the introduction of the first personal computer alongside word processing, that I could confidently function in a teaching environment. My feelings of inadequacy were compounded by others urging me to seek help and support for what was constructed as a dysfunction (Gergen, 2011).

In 2004, I underwent a psychological assessment and was diagnosed with "attention deficit disorder" (ADD) with associated "learning difficulties." This diagnosis was a double-edged sword as it constructed a new version of me as "person with ADD." On reflection, it did help explain some of the issues I have with learning but compounded my insecurities by using a formal label of ADD. The diagnosis came with recommendations about technology that could help with my "condition" with significant others around me suggesting that they always knew there was something "wrong" with me; it felt like my diagnosis gave them the label that they could use to satisfy their long-held beliefs about me.

This label and the lived experience of being me were in conflict as I had come to realize that ADD is not an actual pathology. It's one of the many socially constructed explanations to describe behaviours that do not meet societal norms. The pathologizing of the symptoms of ADD is influenced by societal values where passivity is constructed as the norm and where those on the active/ passive spectrum are seen by society as different, in which the person's behaviour is constructed as problematic. The process of defining this behaviour against a set of symptoms absolves society from any blame related to what the causes of these perceived problems are. I believe that diagnosis does not in any way explain the causes of the differences and emotions that I feel, just differences in observed behaviour. However, the differences had been reinforced by my relationships as a child and the social context in which I was living and

learning at the time. My family and social environments were key determinants in my success as a learner and consequently my internalized notion of self. I was in danger of believing the self-fulfilling prophecy that I could not learn, and this was somehow part of my DNA, fixed and absolute and have struggled with the confidence, support and the belief that I can learn and be loved unconditionally (Riddick, 2000).

The struggles with making sense of adult diagnosis and a yearning to seek to explore further my sense of self led me to counselling training. During that time, I continued to explore my sense of self and challenging long-held beliefs about who I am and how I learn. I now reject my diagnosis and see no meaning to disclosing or telling others of this pathological reductionist view of myself. I take the position that I have a unique learning style and, if provided with support in the right context, I am capable of learning and succeeding (Shaw & Anderson, 2016). I am now learning to re-construct myself as I continue to challenge myself, learn new skills and use my life experiences to develop new ways of supporting my people I support and work alongside. The learning environment and the relationships I've developed over the last three years have helped me to come out of hiding and close all the doors that I had used to protect myself from feelings of hurt and disappointment. The most difficult aspect of this journey was to combat old constructions of myself that still haunt me at times but more recently are fleeting feelings that come and go, and which are countered by the strength I have developed with the support of others in shaping and developing the new sense of self. A confident, skilled capable learner who wants to learn with you.

9 | RELEVANCY TO PRACTICE

I have explored and developed an in-depth understanding of the constructions of me how my learning has been influenced by what some refer to as "othering." I have traced my learning experiences as a boy and man and this exploration has been both joyous and sad and has illuminated the highly damaging consequences of what society controls, prefers and tolerates of the human self. I have learnt that effective learning is contingent on secure attachments and nurturing, enabling relationships that collectively embrace person-centred humanistic models of support. This study adds to the research in this demonstrating how autoethnography can be used to explore constructions of male learners and counsellors. The risks associated with this method were at times frightening and upsetting but I would have not been able to explore my experiences without undertaking this study. Introspection can be a useful process in mental health nursing to help practitioners look at different areas of work, using clinical supervision to explore self.

In writing this paper, I have been able to strengthen the emerging construction of myself as a learner, a person who is curious, bright, compassionate and looking forward to continuing to learn with others.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no known conflicts of interests associated with this publication.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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